

# The Revolt in the South

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Brief Analysis

**S**outhern Iraq is in revolt. Reliable information is scarce, provided by reconnaissance photos, the reports of panicked refugees, and Iraqi exile groups in Tehran, Damascus, and Beirut. Each has its own ax to grind and credit to claim. Perhaps Saddam will succeed in restoring his authority. Perhaps not. If he does not, what can the United States expect and what can it do?

## Origins of the Revolt

There are intelligence reports that Tehran has provided material support to the rebels and that Shi'ite Iraqi fundamentalists based in Tehran are playing a prominent role in the revolt. Whatever justification there is for that story, it is highly unlikely that external elements could constitute the driving force behind the rebellion. Such a widespread revolt can only be the product of internal forces. These include a deep-seated hatred for Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime among Iraqis, particularly the disenfranchised Shi'a majority.

Conventional wisdom has it that the Shi'a of Iraq are not as religious as the Shi'a of Iran; that the Iraqi fundamentalist groups based in Tehran have only limited support among the Iraqi Shi'a; and that the Iraqi Shi'a do not aspire to establish an Islamic Republic in Southern Iraq. There is, as yet, no evidence to suggest that this conventional wisdom is wrong. Most likely, this is a revolt against Saddam's regime, rather than a revolution for Islamic fundamentalism. Shi'a slogans and Islamic clerics may figure prominently as symbols, for lack of any other to serve as a rallying cry for the rebellion. After all, Saddam's repression has effectively quashed political life within Iraq, outside narrow government-authorized channels and religious sentiments rise easily, particularly in the Middle East and particularly when men face the prospect of death. But that is not the same as actively desiring an Islamic Republic in southern Iraq.

Various Iraqi fundamentalist groups in exile seek to promote themselves by taking credit for leadership of the revolt. Those claims should be regarded skeptically. Most likely, this is a revolt without a clear leadership. However, the possibility exists that what is not now primarily a fundamentalist revolt could become so. As the young Iranian women who blithely donned the chador as a symbol of protest against the Shah learned, symbols can become a reality. Groups that are organized and armed have repeatedly taken over in chaotic situations, even though they did not represent the wishes of the majority.

The southern revolt represents the greatest challenge ever to the twenty years of Ba'athist rule in Iraq. In response, Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, has been made responsible for the south. It is considered a conciliatory gesture, because al-Duri has a reputation as a religious figure. But it is unclear whether even such a conciliatory gesture can work.

## Can It Spread?

Unless the regime soon restores its authority in the South, the Kurds in the North may join the revolt. There has already been some unrest in Kurdistan and there are unconfirmed reports of disturbances in the major towns of Sulaymania and Irbil. The unrest may spread to Baghdad as well. It is reported that the central bus station is full of

milling crowds, seeking the whereabouts of their sons, cousins, and nephews in the army, a potential flashpoint for an uprising. The regime's anxiety about its position is reflected in the decision to move troops from the North to the South -- at a time when some unrest has already occurred in Kurdistan, and the regime has every reason to expect more.

If the rebels succeed in maintaining their positions in the South and if the Kurds manage to throw off Saddam's rule in the North, Iraq may like Humpty Dumpty not be easy to put back together. Whether Saddam holds on to Baghdad or is replaced by a military figure, the kind of bloodshed necessary to reassert Baghdad's authority over the North and South would require a bloody military dictatorship, unpopular at home and seeking to deal with internal tensions by external aggression. This is precisely what the United States had hoped to do away with.

### U.S. Policy Options

American influence over the situation is limited, but the United States can have some impact. The U.S. could take the following steps to minimize the prospect that Iraq will go the way of Lebanon -- the worst-case scenario.

- Begin a dialogue with Iraqi opposition groups, including those in exile. The Iraqi exile community is a diverse lot. Some are brave and intelligent men who have risked their lives to oppose Saddam Hussein; others are opportunists, men, not unlike Saddam, who broke with him and now hope to take power on the heels of foreign armies.

Iraqi exile politics are probably more ideological than the sentiments of the Iraqi population inside Iraq. To oppose Saddam Hussein was a dangerous and quixotic venture, because he assassinated those foes which constituted a real danger to him, and took fierce revenge on their families when he could not get at them directly. Those opposing Saddam were usually men of great passion. But the population of Iraq is different. It has suffered a great trauma under Saddam's rule and that has gone far to weaken the appeal of ideological movements among the population inside Iraq. The Iraqi exile community reflects aspects of the Iraqi polity, but is not likely to be representative of the population as a whole. Still, there is utility in talking to the exiles, as some in Congress are doing, to learn who they are, what they want, and what they know about developments in Iraq.

- Reiterate U.S. and UN support for Iraq's territorial integrity at the highest levels to help keep Iran, and other potential predators, at bay.

- Declare American support for eventual democratic government in Iraq. Given the centrifugal tendencies in the country, unleashed by this war, a centralized military regime in Baghdad may no longer be feasible. A transitional, more pluralistic, administration may provide a means to hold the country together in a looser, but ultimately more effective fashion because it would be flexible enough to accommodate Iraq's pluralist forces.

If three political entities emerge in Iraq -- one in the south, another in the center and a third in the north -- the country is not necessarily lost. Kurdish opposition groups are in a position to administer the North. A transitional administration could be encouraged to emerge in the South. Once established in each area, they could form the basis for a new federal system -- which could succeed if it had the support of the international community.

Laurie Mylroie is a 1991 visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and a Bradley fellow at Harvard University's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. She is the author of *Saddam Hussein and the Crisis in the Gulf* (Times Books, 1990). ❖

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